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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT TO TURKMENISTAN OF
USCIRF CHAIRMAN CROMARTIE AND USCIRF COMMISSIONERS, JULY 29
- AUGUST 4

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Embassy Ashgabat warmly welcomes the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to Turkmenistan as the first-ever U.S. delegation here to focus solely on religious freedom. Your visit will help to reinforce the U.S. government's message as it has sought to "turn a new page" in its overall relationship with Turkmenistan that the United States values freedom of religion or belief. Although the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, is making significant changes in some sectors, it is important to realize the country is at the very beginning of a new era. The wreck of a country left behind by the now-deceased President-for-Life, Niyazov, combined with 70 years of colonial Soviet rule, compounded by nomadic/tribal customs and lack of a nation-state concept, create the need for a new model. Turkmenistan was never North Korea, but it is not yet Denmark. Rather, the current state offers a rare opportunity to develop a new model; a model molded by, and representative of, the proud people of Turkmenistan, with patient but consistent nudges by the international community. We recommend that the tone in this first encounter should be positive -- to encourage more openness and new ways of thinking -- but not hortatory. Demands would be counterproductive. END SUMMARY.

INTRODUCTION

¶2. (SBU) Turkmenistan is a hydrocarbon-rich state that shares borders with Afghanistan and Iran. You will find Turkmenistan in the midst of an historic political transition. The unexpected death of President Niyazov on December 21, 2006, ended the authoritarian, one-man dictatorship that for 15 years made Turkmenistan among the most repressive countries in the world. The peaceful transfer of power following Niyazov's death confounded many who had predicted instability because the former president had no succession plan. President Berdimuhamedov quickly assumed power following Niyazov's death with the assistance of the "power ministries" -- including the Ministries of National Security and Defense, and the Presidential Guard -- but his position was, in fact, subsequently confirmed through a public election in which the population eagerly participated, even though it did not meet international standards.

NIYAZOV'S LEGACY

13. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov inherited a country that former President Niyazov had come close to running into the ground. Niyazov siphoned off most of Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon proceeds into non-transparent slush funds used, in part, to finance his massive construction program in Ashgabat at the expense of the country's education and health-care systems. Politically, his increasing paranoia -- particularly after the 2002 assassination attempt against him -- led to high-speed revolving-door personnel changes at the provincial and national level, and an obsessive inclination to micro-manage the details of government. Criticizing or questioning of Niyazov decisions was treated as disloyalty, and could be grounds for removal from jobs, if not worse. Niyazov's "neutral" foreign policy led to Turkmenistan's political and economic isolation from the rest of the world, and his policies calling for mandatory increases in cotton and wheat production led to destructive agricultural and water-use policies that left much of Turkmenistan's arable land salty and played-out.

EDUCATION -- "DIMMER PEOPLE EASIER TO RULE"

14. (SBU) Niyazov's attacks on the educational system grew increasingly destructive in his later years. The Soviet-era educational system was broadly turned into a system designed to isolate students from the outside world and to mold them into loyal Turkmen-speaking presidential thralls. President Niyazov famously defended this policy when, in 2004, he told a fellow Central Asian president, "dimmer people are easier to rule." Niyazov's destruction of his country's education system included cutting the Soviet standard of ten years of

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compulsory education to nine, firing large numbers of teachers and introducing his own works as core curriculum precepts at the expense of the traditional building blocks of a basic education. He slashed higher education to two years of study and discouraged foreign study by refusing to recognize foreign academic degrees. Taken together, these steps created a "lost generation" of under-educated youth incapable of critical thinking and ill-equipped to help Turkmenistan take its place on the world stage.

RULE OF LAW -- A VERY LOW BAR

15. (SBU) Niyazov also left his very negative mark on Turkmenistan's political system. His authoritarianism left a legacy of corrupt officials lacking initiative, accountability and -- in many cases -- the expertise needed to do their jobs. Young officials who came of age after Niyazov's destructive changes to the education system are particularly deficient in skills and broader world vision needed to facilitate Turkmenistan's entry into the international community. Laws are repressive and lack transparency, oversight and recourse mechanisms, and the population's fundamental ignorance of the meaning of rule of law has left the bar low in terms of citizens' expectations of their government.

BERDIMUHAMEDOV REBUILDS THE SYSTEM HE HELPED DESTROY

16. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov still pays nominal lip service to maintaining his predecessor's policies, but he has started reversing many of the most destructive, especially in the areas of education, health and social welfare. He has restored -- and in many cases -- increased old-age pensions that Niyazov had largely eliminated. The president is embarking on a course of hospital-building, with the main focus on improving medical facilities in Turkmenistan's five provinces. To this end, he has already authorized construction of five provincial mother-and-children (maternity) hospitals. He has also publicly committed to improve rural infrastructure and to ensure that every village has communications, electricity and running water.

17. (SBU) In education, Berdimuhamedov is reversing many of the policies Niyazov ordered him to implement while he served as Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers for Education.

Since his inauguration, Berdimuhamedov has ordered a return to the compulsory standard of ten years' education, a return of universities to five years of classroom study, and a new emphasis on exchange programs and the hard sciences. On July 13, he called for recognition of foreign academic degrees, a major step which would allow exchange students to receive credit for their overseas study. The goal is to repair Turkmenistan's broken education system as quickly as possible and to give the country the educated workforce that it needs to compete commercially. These efforts, however, continue to be hampered by old-thinking bureaucrats, especially in the Ministry of Education, who block or impede foreign assistance programs, which they may view as promoting unhealthy "foreign" tendencies among Turkmenistan's youth.

ELIMINATING THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

18. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov has incrementally started dismantling Niyazov's cult of personality. Although you will still see pictures of the deceased president on many major buildings and references to Niyazov's literary works, especially the "Ruhnama," scattered on signs around the city, the new president has banned the huge stadium gatherings and requirement for students and government workers to line the streets, often for hours, along presidential motorcade routes. That said, in some places, Niyazov's picture has been replaced by Berdimuhamedov's, and the new president's quotes are now replacing Ruhnama quotations in newspaper mastheads. Why he's doing this is opaque to us. It may be his manifestation of Turkmenistan's "khan culture," or perhaps he is signaling to the old-guard who put him in office he is not a radical reformer.

SALVAGING A WRECKED POLITICAL SYSTEM

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19. (SBU) Although Berdimuhamedov made few initial adjustments to his cabinet, accepting nearly wholesale the former president's line-up, he has been steadily replacing senior ministry officials since his inauguration. In most cases, these efforts appear to be focused on finding better-qualified individuals. The president has established a state commission to review complaints of citizens against law enforcement agencies, which could potentially become a point of redress against law enforcement organs' most egregious abuses. (Suggesting that he may be disappointed with the commission's slow start, Berdimuhamedov on July 13 removed the Chairman of the Supreme Court -- the head of the commission -- in part because of the Chairman's "lack of management" of the body.) He also has slowly begun to walk back some of the most restrictive controls on movement within the country, first removing police checkpoints on the roads between cities, then -- on July 13 -- eliminating the requirement for Turkmenistan's citizens to obtain permits to travel to border zones (however, the permit system remains in force for foreigners). And, although the president has been slower to strengthen the rule of law, correct Turkmenistan's abysmal human rights and religious freedom record, and promote economic reform, he has told U.S. officials he wants to "turn the page" on the bilateral relationship and is willing to work on areas that hindered improved relations under Niyazov and to accept visits by U.S. delegations directed toward promoting change in those areas.

FOREIGN POLICY: A NEW FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT

10. (U) Notwithstanding his statements that he plans to continue the "neutrality" policies of his predecessor, Berdimuhamedov -- probably at the advice of Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov -- has put a virtually unprecedented emphasis on

foreign affairs. Indeed, Berdimuhamedov has met or spoken telephonically with all the leaders in the region -- including with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan, with whom Niyazov maintained a running feud. He has exchanged visits with Russia's President Putin, and held a high-profile gas summit with Putin and Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev in Turkmenistan's Caspian seaside city of Turkmenbashi (Krasnovodsk). China has a strong and growing commercial presence in Turkmenistan, and continues to court Berdimuhamedov through a series of high-level commercial and political visits. While Turkey has given Berdimuhamedov top-level treatment, including an invitation to Ankara, its relationship with Turkmenistan continues to be colored more by the image of its lucrative trade and construction contracts that are siphoning hundreds of millions of dollars away from state budgets here than by generous development assistance or fraternal support. Berdimuhamedov has also held very positive meetings with high-level U.S. State Department officials and leaders of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and United Nations to discuss areas of potential assistance. He met with UN High Commissioner on Human Rights Louise Arbour in May, the Head of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Christian Strohal, and agreed to a visit by the UN's Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom at an as-yet undetermined date.

GAS GAMES

¶11. (U) Turkmenistan has world-class natural gas reserves, but Russia's monopoly of its energy exports has left Turkmenistan receiving less than the world price and overly beholden to Russia. Pipeline diversification, including both a pipeline to China proposed for 2009 and the possibility of resurrecting plans for a Trans-Caspian pipeline that would avoid the Russian routes, and construction of high-power electricity lines to transport excess energy to Turkmenistan's neighbors, including Afghanistan, would not only enhance Turkmenistan's economic and political sovereignty, but also help fuel new levels of prosperity throughout the region. Berdimuhamedov has told USG interlocutors he recognizes the need for more options and has taken the first steps to this end, but he also took the first

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steps needed to increase the volume of gas exports to Russia -- agreeing in principle to build a new littoral pipeline -- during the May tripartite summit in Turkmenbashi. He will require encouragement and assistance from the international community if he is to maintain a course of diversification in the face of almost certain Russian efforts to keep Turkmenistan from weaning itself away from Russia.

U.S. POLICY TOWARDS TURKMENISTAN

¶12. (U) U.S. policy in Turkmenistan is three-fold:

- Encourage democratic reform and increased respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including support for improvements in the education and health systems;
- Encourage economic reform and growth of a market economy and private-sector agriculture, as well as diversification of Turkmenistan's energy export options;
- Promote security cooperation.

¶13. (SBU) Turkmenistan remains a tempting target for increased cooperation on energy and security, but its past human rights record makes this cooperation problematic for some. In raising its human rights concerns, the United States focuses on three areas:

- Freedom of Movement: Turkmenistan maintains a travel restriction list ("black list") of individuals not allowed to leave the country. Most of the restricted travelers have an immediate or extended family member implicated in the November 2002 assassination attempt against President

Niyazov. The United States is focusing its efforts on calling for: 1) a clear and transparent process for placing a citizen's name on the restricted travel list; 2) notification to the citizen prior to his/her attempt to travel; and 3) the establishment of a process for removal from the list. In recent months, some individuals whose names previously were blacklisted have been allowed to travel abroad.

-- Religious Freedom: Although Turkmenistan has improved its religious-freedom record somewhat during the past two years, some groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, have still been unable to register (a requirement for legal religious activity), and most groups report that they continue to have difficulties importing religious literature other than the Bible or the Koran. Unregistered and some registered groups continue to experience police harassment, though for most registered groups, at least, harassment has decreased fairly substantially from previous years. However, the government has resumed prosecuting conscientious objectors for evading military service after an almost two-year hiatus.

-- Civil Society Group Registration: Since the 2003 law that required all registered NGOs to re-register, very few independent NGOs have been registered by the Ministry of Justice. The embassy has determined that fewer than 10 independent civil society groups have received NGO registration under the new law. Even those NGOs registered, however, continue to have problems, including monitoring of their activities. The embassy has facilitated legal consultations on registration issues to civil society groups wanting to register, but ultimately the law on registration of organizations will probably need to be reformed.

¶14. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov remains closely tied to Niyazov-era interest groups focused on self-preservation because he does not have his own independent political base. Although security cooperation with the United States continues to improve and the government has welcomed assistance in education, health and agriculture, many of the democratic and economic reforms the U.S. government promotes are viewed suspiciously by the regime. We continue to link better bilateral relations and assistance in the areas where this government wants development to gradual democratic and economic reform. For the longer term, we are focusing on preparing the next generation of leaders and society in general with tools to build a more democratic, secure and prosperous nation.

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